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A Disarming Lack of Candor

ON THE EVE OF nuclear arms talks in Geneva, the Reagan administration is bending itself into knots trying to pretend that it has a coherent national security policy that could produce both an American "Star Wars" defense *and* a sweeping arms control agreement with the Soviet Union.

There are two possible explanations for the administration's gyrations. One — the most hopeful, but also the most unlikely — is that we are witnessing a surpassingly shrewd bargaining operation by a group of master poker players, who are maneuvering the Russians into historic negotiations that could actually reverse the arms race.

The second and more likely explanation is that we have entered a strategic Wonderland, guided by a president obsessed by a doubtful idea, who is advised by "experts" whose principal expertise is concocting "rationales that don't torture the facts too badly," as a Republican Senate aide put it last week.

President Reagan's idea that we can have Star Wars and negotiated disarmament, too, is considered implausible by nearly everyone who follows these issues closely from a vantage point anywhere outside the Reagan administration. Superhawks on Capitol Hill, arms controllers, experts and officials all over Western Europe, senior members of past administrations — and numerous officials in the present American government who are never heard from in public — consider this an unrealistic approach.

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The official talk this weekend is upbeat about arms control. But actually, Reagan administration policies, if pursued, will unravel the principal accomplishment of all previous arms control negotiations, the 1972 ABM treaty banning most deployments and testing of anti-missile missiles.

Here again the administration's position is cynical. We are assured — by Reagan, by Nitze and others — that the United States will adhere to the ABM Treaty. But the Star Wars portion of the administration's 1986 defense budget now pending in Congress contains money for the development of "prototypes" of new defensive weapons that violate Article V of the treaty, which commits both countries "not to develop, test or deploy ABM systems or components which are sea-based, air-based, space-based or mobile land-based." These prototypes in the '86 budget, if approved by Congress, could be tested by 1990 — the effective duration, apparently, of the promises to adhere to the treaty.

Our European allies recognize that there is no way to make Star Wars and the ABM Treaty compatible. That is why Margaret Thatcher has sought President Reagan's pledge that he would negotiate with the Soviets before deploying a Star Wars system. The British hope that such negotiations would somehow preserve the existing arms control regime. But can anyone imagine that the United States would spend up to $100 billion to develop a plausible Star Wars system (a conservative estimate of the development cost), and then drop the whole idea because the Soviets declined to accept its introduction after negotiations?

If the ABM treaty must go, many important officials of the Reagan administration won't mind. For despite the reassuring public rhetoric, this American government is filled with people who don't really believe in arms control, and actually prefer to live with the Russians on the basis of bad relations and vigorous competition.

Arnold Horelick, formerly the CIA's national intelligence officer for the Soviet Union and now with the Rand Corp., has described the hard-line element in the administration as convinced that the current strategic trends favor the United States. In this view, we'll be relatively better off five or 10 years from now than we are now, so why rush into new agreements with the Soviets based on today's balance of power?

There is no visible cause for optimism about the arms negotiations begining this week in Geneva. Specialists in NATO foreign ministries and many working-level officials in the United States government agree that there are no real prospects for making a deal unless the Reagan administration is willing to adhere to the ABM treaty and give up active development of the defensive weapons which it bans. But President Reagan specifically rules out using his Star Wars program as a bargaining chip.

The great irony is that the current strategic trends probably are favorable — not if the objective is to gain a meaningful American advantage, but to get negotiated arms reductions under way. The Russians are anxious to avoid a whole new competition in space — the threat of Star Wars has indeed gotten their attention, and it re-

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mains a potentially useful bargaining chip. Our allies are yearning for new negotiated agreements. The Reagan administration could get an effective, comprehensive treaty through the Senate, if one could be negotiated.

Negotiating a deal would not be easy. The issues are complex and growing more complex all the time, as new weapons come into both arsenals. The Soviets appear to be building an elaborate new radar installation that violates the ABM Treaty itself; U.S. planners are tantalized by the prospect that they might get a really usable defensive system to protect land-based American missile silos — something far short of a Star Wars defense, but a neat little improvement in our arsenal that would justify deploying lots of MX missiles (because it could protect many of them in a war). Even without a full-blown Star Wars program, the fragile arms control regime now in force could easily unravel.

And yet, whatever marginal advantages the Soviets might get from their new radar or we might get from "point defense" of missile silos would not begin to provide meaningful new security to either side. Security in a world of 40,000-plus nuclear warheads can't be bought with incremental changes in your arsenal. Security can only come from confidence that the other fellow understands the balance of terror roughly the way you do, and has decided to try to live with it in an orderly way. Security is a political matter, not a technical invention.

Increased security based on political accommodation was always the promise of the arms negotiations launched by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in 1969. Curiously, those two men seem assured of a relatively positive place in history because of their diplomatic accomplishments — and despite transgressions that would sink the reputations of many other public figures.

What sort of historical reputation would a public official enjoy if he is held responsible for destroying the fruits of those earlier negotiations, and also for initiating the most expensive and dangerous round in the entire history of the arms race? Ronald Reagan, apparently surrounded by yes-men and dreamers, may not have faced that question, but perhaps he should.